

Compact Communities

Overview

Compact communities are a time-honored type of development. Historically, they have occurred in several different forms on the Piedmont. Examples include:

- ∑ Small towns, such as Pittsboro;
- ∑ Mill villages, such as Bynum; and
- ∑ Crossroads communities, such as Silk Hope.

To respect the traditional development patterns that are part of Chatham County's heritage and character, to reduce the need for costly infrastructure, to protect farmland and open space, to facilitate travel on foot, by bike, and by transit, and to promote a greater sense of community, the Chatham Plan supports development in compact communities.

Major Conditions & Trends

Most new development in Chatham County is being built in a low-density pattern that separates different uses such as homes and shopping. However, a few local developments such as Fearington Village echo more traditional styles of community design.

In general, at present there are two different approaches to building compact communities:

- ∑ The cluster development approach to residential development discussed under the Rural Character Policy Objective; and
- ∑ The neotraditional neighborhood approach.

While one might think of the rural cluster as a golf course community without the golf course, the neotraditional neighborhood approach might be described using the "five-minute rule." Some advocates of this style of development suggest that the community works if a child can walk safely from home to local destinations in the neighborhood such as a corner store, a park, or a library in five minutes or less. Such communities are often built within or adjacent to existing towns, at crossroads, and at commercial nodes. Common components include:

- ∑ A clustered pattern of development;
- ∑ A mix of land uses, with residential, commercial, and civic components;
- ∑ A mix of housing types;
- ∑ An interconnected street network;
- ∑ Walkable, pedestrian-friendly design;
- ∑ A defined edge that marks the transition to the surrounding rural landscape;
- ∑ Connection to transit; and
- ∑ Connection to open space and recreation.
- ∑ A mix of commercial and residential in multi-story buildings.

Choices for Chatham County

Compact communities are an important component of an integrated strategy for balancing conservation and development in the county. To help facilitate development in this style, Chatham County will:

1. Designate locations/corridors for compact communities;
2. Establish development standards to permit compact communities in the locations designated; and
3. Develop design guidelines for compact communities.

1. Designate locations/corridors for compact communities

Chatham County will:

- ∑ Designate locations and corridors where compact communities are allowed provided they meet the development standards and design guidelines outlined below.
- ∑ Require a minimum separation distance between each compact community built in the designated corridors;
- ∑ Zone the intervening areas between each compact community for agriculture/rural residential uses;
- ∑ Support efforts of towns to locate compact communities within their respective jurisdictions.

2. Establish development standards to permit compact communities in the locations designated

Chatham County will:

- ∑ Require a minimum project size for proposed compact communities;
- ∑ Limit the overall size of the project if it will compromise the walkability, accessibility, and community feel of the project. In general, such developments will probably range from 400 to 1,000 acres.
- ∑ Require a master plan as part of the preliminary plan review process with components similar to those required under the county's existing P.U.D. standards;
- ∑ Allow the project only if it can demonstrate the ability to provide sustainable water treatment and wastewater treatment indefinitely for all uses in the proposed project;
- ∑ Require a minimum residential density to support commercial and civic uses, facilitate walking, and expand potential future transit ridership;
- ∑ Require a mix of residential, commercial, and civic uses;

- Σ Require a minimum percentage of land for neighborhood parks within the community;
- Σ Require a minimum percentage of permanently protected open space adjacent and easily accessible to the community to provide passive recreational opportunities for residents and help preserve rural character;
- Σ Work with the School Board to plan for the siting of new schools in the designated locations/corridors. Explore the possibility of requiring the dedication of land for new schools in designated compact communities as part of receiving the density bonus that the compact community designation constitutes.
- Σ Work with developers to ensure that compact communities meet standards for transit-friendly development.

3. Develop design guidelines for compact communities

Chatham County will establish design guidelines for all compact communities that include the following:

- Σ A definable neighborhood center such as a green or square;
- Σ Smaller public spaces such as parks and playgrounds within easy walking distance of all homes;
- Σ A grid network of streets;
- Σ Limits on street width (Note: Since the county currently follows the state standards for roadway design, it should work with the North Carolina Department of Transportation to develop acceptable alternatives that are appropriate for compact communities);
- Σ A linked pedestrian network that runs throughout the community;
- Σ A maximum setback (“build-to” line) from the street and the adjacent utility corridor;
- Σ A diversity of housing types including single-family homes, townhouses, and apartments (whether free-standing, over garages, and/or over stores) to ensure affordable housing options for residents. The county should examine techniques such as establishing a Housing Trust Fund to help fund the construction of affordable units, providing density bonuses in return for building affordable units, and encouraging or requiring a certain number of units to be under a certain total square footage to help ensure a diversity of housing types and sizes. Efforts should also be made to help ensure the long-term affordability of units that are constructed for this purpose through ground leases and other means such as used by Habitat for Humanity.
- Σ Human-scale commercial development that provides a safe and pleasing environment for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Together, these measures will support the development of compact communities that have been a fixture of the Chatham County landscape for generations.